

▶ **WHY DOES BOUNCE BACK WORK?**

Using Theory to Understand the Success of the Bounce Back Retention Program

To review, research on academic retention emphasizes the institutional responsibility for retention via wide-range programming (Kadar, 2001; Keels, 2004; Lehr, 2004; Salinitri, 2005; Thayer, 2000; Tinto, 2000; Walters, 2004; White, 2004). The resiliency research emphasizes the importance of enhancing the strengths that students personally possess (Banyard & Cantor, 2004; Beasley et al., 2003; Fassig, 2004; Shields, 2001). Both arms of research are relevant to our goals and orientation, and we wanted to incorporate the findings from both areas of study into the development of Bounce Back. Therefore, we concluded that student success depends upon the development of a partnership between the college and its students whereby the institution provides specialized programming, and students take responsibility for their academic success. The Bounce Back Retention Program offers that opportunity. In Bounce Back, a partnership develops between the university and the student and through that partnership, student self-responsibility is promoted. Through institutional support of Bounce Back, the administration conveys its concern for *all* students, even those struggling academically. Students perceive that the university “cares” about them, a point which is frequently articulated by Bounce Back participants. For example, one student remarked, “If the university shows it cares about me, I had better start caring about myself.” Embedded in each module of Bounce Back is the imperative that students self-reflect, take initiative, and evidence responsibility for their academic success.

One overarching goal of the Bounce Back curriculum is to enhance the social capital of students on probation by assisting with the college *acculturation* process. It is clear from the literature that successful students feel a connection to their university. Bounce Back classes are intentionally small in number so that a personalized environment is created. Students become part of a Bounce Back community, and are relieved to find that there are other students with whom they can identify. This commonality makes academic probation status less shameful. In short, Bounce Back creates a sense of connection which contrasts with all too common feelings of isolation.

Positive psychology also serves as a foundation for Bounce Back. We began with the assumption that our students are highly competent, having met stringent admission standards. We also assumed that they were negatively impacted by academic probation. Many universities take a punitive approach to students on academic probation, assuming irresponsibility or ineptness on the part of the student. Since guilt is not a motivator for long-term change, Bounce Back focuses on eliciting students' strengths instead of using shaming or scare tactics.

This is not to say that we haphazardly tell students they are great and that they will magically succeed. Instead, we create a space for contemplation. The literature suggests that students will become more responsible for their academics when programming promotes self-reflection. Even in the more traditional academic sections, we encourage students to be introspective, helping them use their thoughts as well as their feelings to grasp the material.

Bounce Back is not just growth producing in our students. Facilitators and coaches consistently report on the enrichment they derive from leading and participating in the program. Perhaps most rewarding is helping students become more aware of their competence. As students come to see themselves as “survivors,” they survive. As they see what they have done, they become more confident in what they can do. As students identify as persistent, they become even more resilient.

Such is the power of Bounce Back.

